

Rebirth of Planet Earth



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Isa. 65:17–25, Isa. 66:1–19, Isa. 66:19–21, Isa. 66:21, Isa. 66:22–24.*

Memory Text: “‘For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; and the former shall not be remembered or come to mind’ ” (*Isaiah 65:17, NKJV*).

One day, a 12-year-old boy, having just read a book on astronomy, refused to go to school. His mother took the child to the family doctor, who asked, “Billy, what’s the matter? Why don’t you want to study or go to school anymore?”

“Because, Doctor,” he said, “I read in this astronomy book that one day the sun is going to burn out and all life on earth will vanish. I don’t see any reason to do anything if, in the end, everything will die out.”

The mother, hysterical, shouted, “It’s not your business! It’s not your business!”

The doctor smiled and said, “But, Billy, you don’t need to worry, because by the time this happens, we’ll all be long dead, anyway.”

Of course, that’s part of the problem: in the end, we’re all dead, anyway.

Fortunately, our existence doesn’t have to end in death. On the contrary, we have been offered life, eternal life, in a world made new.

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 27.

New Heavens and a New Earth *(Isa. 65:17–25)*

Read Isaiah 65:17–25. What kind of restoration does the Lord promise here?

God promises a new creation, beginning with the words: “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (*Isa. 65:17, NRSV*). In this remarkable prophecy, the Lord promises to “create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight” (*Isa. 65:18, NRSV*). In the city there will be no more weeping (*Isa. 65:19*). People normally will live considerably longer than a century before they die (*Isa. 65:20*). Their work and children will remain for them to enjoy (*Isa. 65:21–23*). God will answer them even before they call (*Isa. 65:24*).

Nice as it is, why is this not a picture of our final restoration, our final hope?

Thus far we have a picture of tranquil long lives in the Promised Land. But even though people live longer, they still die. Where is the radical transformation of nature we expect with the creation of “new heavens” and a “new earth”? The next verse tells us: “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD” (*Isa. 65:25, NRSV*).

For carnivores such as lions to become vegetarian requires far more than a vegetarian cooking class. It requires a re-creation to restore the world to its ideal state, as it was before sin in Eden introduced death.

Here in Isaiah 65, God presents the creation of “new heavens” and a “new earth” as a process, a series of steps, that begins with the re-creation of Jerusalem. Compare Isaiah 11, where the Messiah would bring justice (*Isa. 11:1–5*). Then, eventually, there will be peace on God’s worldwide “holy mountain”; the imagery used in Isaiah 11 is similar to what’s found in Isaiah 65: “The wolf shall live with the lamb . . . and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (*Isa. 11:6, 7, NRSV*). Although the Lord’s “holy mountain” would begin with Mount Zion at Jerusalem, it was only a precursor, a symbol, of what God promises to do, ultimately, in a new world with His redeemed people.

Suppose instead of living 60, 70, 90, or even 100 years, most people lived a million years or more. Why, still, would the fundamental problem of humanity not be solved? Why is eternal life the only answer to our deepest human needs?

Divine “Magnet” (*Isa. 66:1–19*)

Read Isaiah 66:1–19. Keeping in mind the time in which Isaiah wrote, what is the basic message he is giving here?

Through the prophet, God reiterates the appeal and warning that permeates the book: God will save and restore the humble, who tremble at His Word (*Isa. 66:2, 5*). As in Isaiah 40:1, He will comfort them (*Isa. 66:13*). But He will destroy those who rebel against Him. These include hypocrites of ritual, whose sacrifices He rejects (*Isa. 66:3, 4; compare Isa. 1:10–15*), as well as those who hate and reject His faithful ones (*Isa. 66:5*). They also include those who practice pagan abominations (*Isa. 66:17*) such as those practiced at the temple in Jerusalem (*Ezek. 8:7–12*).

Look at Isaiah 66:3. What is this text saying? What spiritual principles are being revealed here? How might the same idea be expressed, but in the context of contemporary Christianity and worship?

How does God serve as a magnet to draw the nations to Himself? (*Isa. 66:18, 19.*)

Following the destruction of His enemies (*Isa. 66:14–17*), God reveals His glory so that He becomes a magnet to draw people to Jerusalem (*compare Isa. 2:2–4*). He sets a “sign” among them, which is not specified here but apparently refers to the sign last mentioned by Isaiah: God gives His people joy and peace and restores their land (*Isa. 55:12, 13*). When He reveals His glory by restoring His people after destruction, this is a sign of His restored favor, just as He gave Noah the sign of the rainbow after the Flood (*Gen. 9:13–17*).

Read Isaiah 66:5. What does it mean to tremble at His Word? Why does the Lord want us to tremble at His Word? If you don’t tremble, what might that say about the condition of your heart?

Missionaries and Worship Leaders *(Isa. 66:19–21)*

What is the meaning of survivors bringing people from the nations as an offering to the Lord? *(Isa. 66:19, 20.)*

God sends survivors of His destruction out to the ends of the earth, to people who do not know about God, “and they shall declare my glory among the nations” *(Isa. 66:19, NRSV)*. This is one of the clearest Old Testament statements on the theme of missionary outreach. In other words, not only are people to be drawn to the Hebrew nation but also some of the Hebrew people will go to other nations and teach them about the true God—a paradigm that is explicit in the New Testament. Though there was Jewish missionary outreach between the time of return from exile and the time of Christ *(Matt. 23:15)*, the early Christians spread the gospel rapidly and on a massive scale *(Col. 1:23)*.

Just as the Israelites brought grain offerings to the Lord at His temple, so the missionaries would bring an offering to Him. But their offering would be “all your kindred from all the nations” *(Isa. 66:20, NRSV)*. Just as grain offerings were gifts to God that were not slaughtered, the converts brought to the Lord would be presented to Him as “living sacrifices” *(compare Rom. 12:1)*. For the idea that people could be presented as a kind of offering to God, note the much earlier dedication of Levites “as an elevation offering from the Israelites, that they may do the service of the LORD” *(Num. 8:11, NRSV)*.

What is the significance of God’s promise to “take some of them as priests and as Levites” *(Isa. 66:21, NRSV)*?

The “them” in verse 21 refers to “your kindred from all the nations” *(NRSV)* in the previous verse. These are Gentiles, some of whom God would choose as worship leaders, along with the priests and Levites. This is a revolutionary change. God previously had authorized only descendants of Aaron to serve as priests and only other members of the tribe of Levi to assist them. Gentiles could not literally become descendants of Aaron or Levi, but God would authorize some to serve in these capacities, which had previously been forbidden even to most Jews.

Read 1 Peter 2:9, 10. To whom is Peter writing? What is he saying? What message does he have for each of us, as members of a “holy nation” today? Are we doing any better than the original people? *(Exod. 19:6.)*

Community of Faith *(Isa. 66:21)*

The Israelites were “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (*Exod. 19:6, NRSV*), with special priests set apart to represent them as worship leaders. But in the future, some Gentiles would become worship leaders (*Isa. 66:21*).

How would this change affect the renewed community of faith? (*See Matt. 28:19, Acts 26:20, Gal. 3:28, Col. 3:11, 1 Tim. 3:16.*)

In God’s “new world order,” Gentiles would not only join God’s people but they also would be equal partners with Jews in a combined community of faith that would be a “royal priesthood.” Therefore, the distinction between Jews and Gentiles would become functionally irrelevant.

When was this prophecy of Isaiah fulfilled?

Paul, the missionary to the Gentiles, proclaimed: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, . . . for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise” (*Gal. 3:28, 29, NRSV*).

Becoming heirs of the promise and therefore an exalted “royal priesthood” was not a mandate for smug elitism but a commission to join the Jews in proclaiming “the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (*1 Pet. 2:9, NRSV; compare Isa. 66:19*).

The elevation of Gentiles did not entitle Jews to grumble that God was unfair in giving them the same reward. Nor did it entitle Gentiles to treat their Jewish brothers and sisters with disrespect, any more than workers hired later in the day should look down on those hired earlier (*see Matt. 20:1–16*). The Jews had first been “entrusted with the oracles of God” (*Rom. 3:2, NRSV*) as God’s channel of revelation. Paul wrote to Gentiles: “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, a wild olive shoot, were grafted in their place to share the rich root of the olive tree, do not boast over the branches” (*Rom. 11:17, 18, NRSV*).

In light of the Cross, in light of the gospel commission, why is any kind of spiritual or ethnic or even political elitism so abhorrent in the sight of God? Look closely at yourself; are you harboring any sense of spiritual or ethnic superiority? If so, repent!

So Shall Your Seed and Your Name Remain *(Isa. 66:22–24)*

Read Isaiah 66:22. What is the text saying to us? What hope can we find there?

One of the most wonderful promises in Isaiah is found in Isaiah 66:22. Read it carefully. In the new heavens and the new earth, our seed and our name shall remain—forever. No more blotting out, cutting off, grafting in, plucking up, or uprooting. We have here a promise of eternal life in a world made new—a world without sin, without death, without suffering, a new heaven and a new earth, the final and complete fulfillment of our Christian faith, the consummation of what Christ had accomplished for us at the cross.

Why are there new moons along with Sabbaths in the depiction of the new heavens and the new earth as presented in Isaiah 66:23?

Though there are a number of different ways to look at this difficult text, one approach is this: God created the Sabbath before the sacrificial system existed (*Gen. 2:2, 3*). So, although Sabbaths were honored by the ritual system, they are not dependent upon it. Thus, they continue uninterrupted throughout the restoration period, on into the new earth. There is no indication in the Bible that new moons were legitimate days of worship apart from the sacrificial system. But perhaps they will be worship days (but not necessarily rest days like weekly Sabbaths) in the new earth, possibly in connection with the monthly cycle of the tree of life (*Rev. 22:2*).

Whatever the specific meaning of Isaiah 66:23 may be, the crucial point seems to be that God's people will be worshipping Him throughout eternity.

Why does Isaiah end with the negative picture of saved people looking at the corpses of rebels destroyed by God? (*Isa. 66:24*.)

As a graphic warning to the people of his day, Isaiah encapsulates the contrast between faithful survivors of the Babylonian destruction and rebels, who would be destroyed. This is not everlasting torment—the rebels are dead, killed by “fire,” a destruction that was not quenched until it did its job so that the re-creation of Jerusalem could begin.

Isaiah's warning points forward to an ultimate fulfillment prophesied by the book of Revelation: destruction of sinners, Satan, and death in a lake of fire (*Revelation 20*), after which there will be “a new heaven and a new earth,” a holy “new Jerusalem,” and no more weeping or pain, “‘for the first things have passed away’ ” (*Rev. 21:1–4, NRSV; compare Isa. 65:17–19*), a new existence, with eternal life for all who are redeemed from the earth.

Further Thought: On the final cleansing of planet Earth from sin, read Ellen G. White, “The Controversy Ended,” in *The Great Controversy*, pp. 662–678.

“And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of His character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption and the amazing achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.

“‘And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.’ Revelation 5:13.

“The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.”
—Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 678.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Why is the promise of eternal life in a new heaven and a new earth so basic to our Christian belief? What good would our faith be without that promise?
- 2 Read 2 Peter 3:10–14. How do these verses reflect the same idea presented in Isaiah 66?

Summary: Isaiah presents a vision of staggering scope. Not only would God purge and restore His community of faith but He also would enlarge its borders to encompass all nations. Ultimately the re-creation of His community would lead to the re-creation of planet Earth, where His presence would be the ultimate comfort of His people.

Tire Trouble

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY, Adventist Mission

Ilya Koltuk, a pastor and men's dean at Zaosky Adventist University in Russia, climbed into the car with his wife to go on a Black Sea vacation.

After about ten hours, the car started having tire trouble.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Ilya wasn't sure what was wrong.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

He stopped the car and got out. Standing over the tires, he couldn't see any problem. He prayed with his wife.

"Dear God, we are having trouble with the tires," he prayed. "Please help us."

Ilya slid behind the steering wheel and drove on.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

The noise grew louder and louder. Ilya and his wife had traveled 600 miles (1,000 kilometers). They couldn't easily turn around and go home. They still had 250 miles (400 kilometers) to go until they reached their destination.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Ilya prayed silently. Suddenly he sensed a male voice say, "Stop at that car-repair shop and go to the mechanics inside."

Startled, he looked out the window and saw a car-repair shop. He stopped and found two men sitting and talking as if they didn't have any work to do.

"Can you help me?" Ilya said. "My car is making noises."

The mechanics checked the car. They rotated the tires. They did other things.

"Get in," a mechanic said finally. "You can go."

"Thank you," Ilya said. "How much do I owe you?"

"Two hundred rubles," he said, or about US\$3.

Ilya found 200 rubles and a pocket-sized Gospel of John. He tucked the money in the book and handed it to the surprised mechanics.

"What is this?" a mechanic asked.

"The gospel," Ilya said.

The mechanics grew more surprised. "Are you a pastor?" one asked.

Ilya nodded.



The mechanics' faces lit up with joy. They took the 200 rubles out of the book and returned it to Ilya. One of them held up the book.

"God sent this book to us," he said. "We were just talking about God when you arrived."

Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help construct a grade school and high school building on the campus of Zaosky Adventist University in Russia.